



Our Sphere of Influence: Women Activists and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society

William Lloyd Garrison recognized the necessity of engaging women in the crusade against slavery when he declared in 1832, "Whose influence is so potent as woman's?"¹ As guardians of the home, educators of future citizens, and the persuasive moral voice within the domestic sphere, Garrison perceived the strength that women, seen as benevolent and influential, could add to the movement. Garrison's call to widen the circle of antislavery participation to include women and black activists reflected the transformations within the movement by the 1830s. When Garrison founded the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, he unified activists to form a national, interracial society that infused the movement with moral and religious appeals for the immediate end of slavery. The AASS symbolized the new energy and vibrancy of the antislavery movement, but also highlighted the ambiguous nature of women's involvement. At the AASS's 1833 founding convention in Philadelphia, a resolution was passed emphasizing the importance of women's contributions and encouraging their participation, but absent from the list of delegates invited to become members of the society were any female names. Inspired by the activism of the 1830s, yet denied entrance into these all-male organizations, women sought a place of their own within the movement. In December 1833, a small group of women formed the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, which quickly became one of the most active and influential female organizations in the antebellum period.

Lucretia Mott, a white female abolitionist in Philadelphia and a Quaker minister, was instrumental in forming the PFASS. Mott attended the second day of the American Anti-Slavery Society convention and, as an observer, witnessed the formation of this all-male organization.

¹ Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 139.

Already a well-known activist who participated in the Free Produce Movement which advocated the boycott of slave-made goods, Mott responded to the call for women's participation. On December 9, 1833, she organized other like-minded women to discuss the role that they could assume in the abolition movement. The women gathered in the small schoolroom of Catherine McDermott, a local Quaker teacher, and created the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society as an auxiliary to the American Anti-Slavery Society. Uncertain of the protocol for public meetings, the women requested that James McCrummel, an African American minister and dentist, oversee the meeting. Many women were unaccustomed to making speeches and were quite nervous at the prospect of speaking in a public setting. Modeling their society after male organizations, the PFASS members committed fourteen women to the task of drafting a constitution. Five days later on December 14, 1833, the members of the fledgling PFASS drafted its constitution and established an administrative body that included a president, recording secretary, corresponding secretary, treasurer, and librarian. According to the constitution, the officers were to be supervised by a board of managers who would meet on a monthly basis.

Membership in the PFASS was not limited to women from a particular segment of society. Instead, the founding members made it clear that the society was open to any woman who supported the mission and philosophy. However, the majority of the PFASS members characterized themselves as good Quaker abolitionists and most were from middle-class families. Yet, this did not apply to all of the members. Mary Grew, a native New Englander from Hartford, Connecticut, and the daughter of a Baptist minister, served as the corresponding secretary for the society, authoring the annual reports and frequently communicating with other female antislavery societies in the United States and in England. The PFASS, despite its Quaker origins, welcomed a level of religious diversity that had yet to be found in other organizations.

If the PFASS seemed decidedly committed to religious pluralism, its pledge to racial integration was, perhaps, even greater. Beginning with the founding meeting, black women maintained an active role in the organization. Notably, African American abolitionist Sarah McCrummel, wife to James McCrummel, Philadelphia minister and chair of the first meeting,

participated in the PFASS and held a position on the board of managers at various times. Charlotte Forten, wife of African American abolitionist James Forten, helped to found the PFASS. Her daughters and daughter-in-law followed in her footsteps as they supported the organization's efforts. Grace Bustill Douglass helped found the PFASS. Her daughter, Sarah, became one of the most active members, serving in a variety of capacities during her tenure with the PFASS. She served on the board of managers and the fundraising committee as well as held the position of librarian and recording secretary. Added to this, Sarah Douglass's involvement with a school for black children helped to shape the educational mission of the society. The Douglass women, like many black activists, organized black female societies within their communities, thus their involvement in the PFASS was a natural outgrowth of those experiences.

Over the course of the PFASS's forty-year history, the numbers of African American women never reached great proportions. Many worked exclusively within black antislavery and religious organizations. Regardless, black women in the PFASS retained visible and active roles. Though no black woman became president of the society, several held positions on the board of managers or in other offices. This set the PFASS apart from other female antislavery societies that resisted this level of racial integration. The work between white and black women in this period of highly contentious race relations reflects the PFASS's commitment to gender and racial equality.

Antebellum notions regarding gender roles and the concept of women inhabiting a separate sphere both helped and hindered women's involvement in the antislavery movement. Defined by their position in the domestic realm, women, considered the moral leaders, were expected to create a caring and virtuous home for their children and a safe retreat for their husbands. Slavery was regarded as an institution that corrupted the moral fiber of the country, destroyed families, engendered abuse of women and children, and corrupted religion to justify itself. To the women who participated in antislavery societies, all of these issues related to their sphere of influence and gave them the right to advocate for slavery's destruction.

The women of the PFASS conducted activities that reflected traditional gender roles, but even as women operated within their sphere, they expanded the boundaries of that sphere. The PFASS

encouraged women to exercise their role as guardians of the home by boycotting goods manufactured by slave labor. Women also used their position as educators to spread antislavery rhetoric. The PFASS purchased antislavery materials such as the *North Star* and the *Liberator* to distribute to neighborhoods that otherwise would not have had access to this important literature.

The women of the PFASS organized sewing circles to produce items with antislavery inscriptions and mottos. They held annual fairs before Christmas to sell these items and used most of the proceeds to support the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society. In addition to becoming an important fundraising strategy, these fairs accomplished several things for women. They allowed women across the country and the world to coordinate their efforts and demonstrate solidarity. Women from France and England as well as from other female antislavery societies in New York and Massachusetts contributed to and supported the fairs. They were also a means of spreading information. Needlework or pottery with antislavery inscriptions that would be prominently displayed in the home constituted a powerful assertion of the female antislavery activists' opinion.

While female antislavery societies such as the PFASS tried to conduct their activities according to appropriate or expected feminine roles, they faced opposition to their activism. Some abolitionists frowned upon women's involvement due to the highly politicized nature of slavery, arguing that this issue was not a suitable subject for female involvement. Activities such as organizing antislavery petitions to send to Congress generated criticism as they blatantly inserted women into the public realm, requiring women to go door-to-door seeking signatures of support. Female petitions placed political pressure upon Congress as women reminded their political leaders that though they lacked the ability to vote, they, the wives of voters, had influence. In 1837, Congress received 43,441 male signatures and 63,178 female signatures on antislavery petitions.

In addition to petitioning, the women of the PFASS and other antislavery groups organized and spoke at public lectures to rally support and spread their antislavery message. Opposition to this type of female activism sometimes came in the form of open hostility. In 1838, the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was held in Philadelphia. National and international delegates from

various female antislavery organizations gathered in the new abolitionist lecture hall, Pennsylvania Hall, to reflect upon, discuss, and share ideas about their activities. As the women held their convention, several other antislavery groups met in the same building. The prospect of mixed-race and mixed-gender meetings in the building prompted a violent backlash. On the second day of the convention, mob violence erupted and the Pennsylvania Hall was burned to the ground. Images in the aftermath of violence depicted the “promiscuous” nature of the meeting in Pennsylvania Hall with black men and white women socializing. If women did not face physical violence, they faced an equally destructive weapon—an attack upon their character. The femininity and virtue of antislavery women who went beyond the appropriate level of activism underwent public scrutiny.

The activities of the PFASS continued beyond the Civil War as the society focused on protecting and expanding the rights of African Americans, particularly with respect to voting. For many of the female members, activism on behalf of black suffrage brought women one step closer to securing their own rights. Following the 1870 passage of the Fifteenth Amendment that secured black male suffrage, the PFASS disbanded. However, the lessons learned from this period of female activism helped shape the nineteenth century women’s suffrage movement. The women of the PFASS and other antislavery societies discovered ways of becoming vital advocates of change in spite of the limitations placed upon their gender.

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